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ABSTRACT

Teaching native and nonnative English speakers together in the same classroom can be accomplished well only by a teacher who is sensitive to the concerns of the nonnative students. Personal interviews conducted with nonnative speakers indicated that the most recurrent out-of-class problems include separation from friends and family, distinctions between British and American English, and telephone conversations. Classroom problems include teachers who fail to articulate, have nonstandard accents, or neglect to emphasize the main points. Differences between textbook English and spoken usage, as well, in some instances, as the culture shock of seeing women in a position of authority in the classroom, can also provide interference. Teacher efforts to resolve these problems include articulating clearly and clarifying material, being aware of the difficulties posed by slang, and recognizing the differences between British and American dialects. Workshops for nonnative speakers and teacher involvement with professional societies can also be of great help. (HTH)

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Teaching Native and Nonnative Speakers Together in Professional Communication Courses

Richard David Ramsey

In university courses such as technical writing and business communication one usually finds it necessary to teach native and nonnative speakers together in the same classroom. But these two groups--native and nonnative--have different concerns, outside as well as inside the classroom. Outside the classroom, the nonnative speaker has particular concerns about separation from friends and family, differences in life-style between the native country and the host country, distinctions between British and American English, and difficulties of functioning in English in situations such as over the telephone. Inside the classroom, the nonnative speaker often has to contend with teachers who fail to articulate, teachers who have nonstandard accents, and teachers who neglect to emphasize the main points, and with L_1 interference, social interference, and differences between textbook English and classroom usage. The difficult task of teaching native and nonnative speakers together can be accomplished well only by a teacher who is sensitive to the concerns of nonnative speakers. Workshops, professional societies, and research can variously help ameliorate these concerns, which will intensify as more and more nonnative speakers seek higher education in English-speaking countries.

Universities and colleges often set aside special sections of freshman English to accommodate the needs of nonnative speakers. No such accommodation

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is usually available, however, in other courses which address largely verbal skills--courses such as business communication and technical writing. The reasons for this lack of special ESL sections in these courses have to do with budgetary considerations in view of the more select audience for these courses. Consequently, in these verbal-skills courses nonnative speakers must compete directly with native speakers. But what are the strategies and techniques for best handling the situation of the nonnative speaker in such professional communication courses?

Literature Review

In the Summer 1981 issue of the Journal of Business Communication, Ann M. Johns published a list of items which concern the topic of ESL students in English business communication classes. Subsequently, several articles and reviews in the TESOL Quarterly and the Journal of Business Communication have at least touched on the theme. There has come along one textbook (Huckin and Olsen 1983; cf. Olsen and Huckin 1983) which intends specifically to address the needs of nonnative speakers in professional communication courses. What is needed still, however, is more discussion of sound advice as to how to deal effectively with nonnative students competing directly with native speakers in professional communication courses.

Problems

To begin surveying the problems which nonnative speakers encounter in an English-speaking university, I conducted personal interviews with 16 of the foreign students who have had my undergraduate course in

business communication. What information I garnered from these interviews I combined with personal observations from teaching technical writing and business communication to native and nonnative speakers over several years. I have segmented these problems into out-of-class problems and in-class problems.

These are the most recurrent general out-of-class problems which I detected:

- Separation from friends and family. It is obvious that many foreign students are homesick.
- Differences in lifestyles, folkways, and mores between the native country and the United States (or the United Kingdom, where I have also taught in summer schools). Foreign students frequently find American society very free but also somewhat superficial.
- Distinctions between British and American English (a problem which also quite often occurs in class). Fortunately, the differences between British and American syntax are few (for example, British "Have you got the time?" as opposed to American "Do you have the time?"), and the differences in phonology are for the most part regular (a relatively few phonological rules will encompass virtually all the major differences between British and American pronunciation). Vocabulary is the real problem and is most noticeable with regard to concepts which have developed since 1776 (such as the parts of a car or automobile) and with regard to slang (for example, the completely different meanings which <u>knock up</u> has in the two dialects).

- Telephone conversation. A few foreign students are especially apprehensive about talking in English to a native speaker over the telephone. This apprehension is probably far more characteristic of the less-fluent speakers.

The general problems which nonnative speakers cite from their experience in class may be summarized to a large extent into the categories below. To encompass all such potential problems, I have chosen to ignore the question of whether the problem is likely to occur in a communication class or in just any class.

- Teachers who fail to articulate. Without exception the students whom I interviewed said that the failure of some, perhaps most, teachers clearly to enunciate was a severe difficulty.
- Teachers who have nonstandard accents. The individual teacher's accent is more likely to be a source of difficulty at the start of the term. The teacher's accent becomes less and less of a problem as the student grows accustomed to it.
- Teachers who neglect to emphasize the main points. In lectures foreign students can often follow less familiar aspects of the subject matter if the teacher states the main point clearly and emphatically. Of course, a rambling ill-defined lecture which lacks proper introduction of the topic may do little to advance the education of native speakers too.
- L_1 interference. The nonnative speakers who are less fluent in English are especially likely to be confused by cognates between English and the native language. The problem emerges in lectures but is more painful on tests.

- Social interference. The behavior of teachers in the United States is radically different from the behavior of teachers in the countries from which most of the students whom I interviewed come. Male students from some cultures have understandably to undergo an adjustment to the fact of women in the teachers' roles of authority. Students from Moslem cultures readily adjust, however, to female teachers whose dress and manner are professional and circumspect. Some male students from some Latin American cultures may conceptualize romantic overtones in the quality of marks which they receive from attractive female teachers.
- Differences between textbook English and actual usage. The nonnative speakers generally feel victimized by the occurrence of slang on tests. The use of slang with which they are unfamiliar in lectures is also a source of much vexation.

Some Solutions

Here are some possible solutions which one may consider for dealing with the problems of nonnative speakers in professional communication courses:

- Sensitivity toward the needs of nonnative students in professional communication courses. Teachers should strive to articulate and to clarify. Slang, if necessary, should be explained in lectures, and generally avoided on tests. Awareness on the part of teachers to the differences between British and American dialects will also be helpful.

- Differentiation in the types of problems which foreign students have. Some questions which foreign students raise will be best handled after class or even in the privacy of the teacher's office. In the feedback to be gained from facial expressions, nonverbals, etc., teachers should be positively alert to foreign students' special difficulties.
- Workshops. To help nonnative speakers improve in professional communication in English, there are several summer courses, among them the following: for graduate students, the courses coordinated by Frank Jaster of the School of Business Administration at the Tulane University of Louisiana, New Orleans; for undergraduates, the courses coordinated by Patrick Kelley of the Intensive English Program at the Ohio University, Athens, Ohio; and for teachers, the courses coordinated by Thomas N. Huckin of the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (Huckin each year conducts his program in Germany also). Teachers wishing to develop their own workshops may want to consult Southard 1982.
- Involvement in professional societies. Many members of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages can improve their career health and professional outreach by joining societies such as the American Business Communication Association (English Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, USA 61801), the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (Department of Language, Literature and Communication, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, USA 12181), or the Society for Technical Communication (815 Fifteenth Street N W, Washington, D.C., USA 20005). The symbiotic benefits to be gained from such dual membership are considerable.

- Research. More data are needed in the techniques of teaching native and nonnative speakers together in professional communication courses. On the basis of the interviews which I have held and the theoretical framework established, I have already proceeded to formulate a questionnaire to serve in a foreign-student survey which hopefully will generate useful data.

Conclusion

The challenge of nonnative speakers of English in professional communication courses with native speakers will increase as coming years unfold, bringing unprecedented numbers of bright, well-motivated foreign students to the United States in particular (see "IIE 1982 survey" 1983). There are indeed many serious issues to be addressed.

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